

Helpston



Woodcroft Castle



St Botolph's Church

The village of Helpston lies at a junction of two contrasting landscapes. To the east are the flat lands of the fens, formerly expanses of marsh and reed bed, now fertile farmland. To the west is gentle, rolling and often wooded countryside with pretty limestone villages.

Perhaps this location on the cusp of two landscapes accounts for Helpston's periodic changes of administrative location. Sir Nicholas Pevsner, author of the historic 'Buildings of England' series, was clearly confused by this as he included Helpston first in his volume on Northamptonshire, then Bedfordshire and finally Huntingdon!

During the medieval period Helpston would have changed little. Apart from St Botolph's itself, Woodcroft Castle and Torpel Manor are likely to have been the most important buildings in the area. The Castle was built in the reign of Edward 1, who also owned Torpel Manor. The Manor of Woodcroft was held by the Woodcroft family from the 12th century for the fee of half a knight from the Abbot of Peterborough. The property was purchased by the Fitzwilliam family in 1545 and remained in the same family until 1988.

Another of the village's medieval structures is the Market, or as it is known locally, 'Butter', Cross, which is believed to date from the 14th century.

From medieval times, Helpston would have been part of the Nassaburgh Hundred, the meeting place of which was at the Langley Bush, near Southey Woods. The Hundred had jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters. Lord Exeter was steward of the court and when it ceased to meet outdoors (in the early 18th century), sessions were held in his house in Helpston, now the Exeter Arms – with the lock-up next door, now Botolph's Barn.



Helpston's Butter Cross

Helpston's history can be traced back at least to Roman times, when a large villa stood one mile south of the village, close to King Street, a major Roman road. The villa dates from the 2nd and 4th centuries and appears to have been a large establishment with decorated walls and mosaics. A piece of mosaic was found near the site in 1827.

Helpston isn't mentioned in the Domesday Book, but restoration work on St Botolph's Church in 1864/5 exposed evidence of Anglo-Saxon foundations, so there was certainly a settlement of some sort here before the Conquest.

Helpston in the nineteenth century



Helpston railway station



Perhaps the beginnings of modern Helpston can be traced to the early nineteenth century with the enclosure of the land and the opening of the road across to Glinton in 1813.



Village water pump

Helpston's enclosure act was passed in 1809, although the detailed Award was not until 1820. Prior to enclosure agriculture would have been dominated by the rotational three field

system, which was based on simple strip farming and large areas of common land, shared for pasture and wood.

Whilst enclosure may have heralded the start of modern agriculture, (Earl Fitzwilliam is said to have invested £10,000 in enclosing the lands around Helpston and Maxey and made a 30% profit on his investment), it was strongly resisted, not least in words by John Clare who wrote:

*Inclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing remain
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitors – though the brook is running still*

Equally dramatic was the arrival of the railway. An Act of Parliament of 1845 allowed the Midland Railway Company 'to make a branch from the said railway near Syston, in the County of Leicester, to the city of Peterborough'. In 1846 a further Act allowed the Great North Company to build the main north-south line.

By the end of the 19th century, Helpston not only had its own station, but also a thriving paper mill, opened in the 1850's. Helpston's school opened in 1856 and the general store is mentioned in 1876 with a Mr. William Shillaker listed as baker, draper and grocer. By 1898 a Mr. Young had taken over these functions, with the added title of Postmaster.

As well as St Botolph's Church, which became a united benefice with St Stephen's at Etton in 1893,



Hay cart

the village was also home to two Methodist communities. A new United Methodist Chapel was built in 1863. This was followed in 1871 by a Primitive Methodist (or Ranters) Chapel (now the village Scout Hut). Earlier in the century, John Clare had attended services of both groups, writing of the Ranters, 'at 7 o'clock they meet to pray, at 9 they join the Class, at half past ten they hear preaching, at half past two they meet again to pray and at 7 in the evening preaching again.'

In 1894 Helpston Parish Council was established. The Stamford Mercury wrote of the birth of this new organ of government, 'May the villagers seize their opportunity and village life once more show signs of flourishing.'

Helpston in the twentieth century



First combine harvester



Special constables

Like the nineteenth, the twentieth century was a time of great physical and societal change in Helpston.

Perhaps most obvious has been the gradual expansion of the village. Whilst its population has grown quite slowly (from 697 in 1851 to 870 in 2005), the number of houses has increased dramatically. Most recently 40 new houses are to be built on the site of the former mill, which closed after 152 years of business in 2006.

In 1907, Helpston's almshouses opened on West Street. These were endowed by Sir James Bradford, son of a former landlord of the Blue Bell, and remain open today.



Hilda Vergette up a pylon

The subject of electric street lighting for the village was first raised in 1895, but a special public meeting in 1914 voted to take no further steps. It was not until 1936 that the first five street lamps were erected: on the Village Green, in Woodgate, by 'Wind in the Willows' on West Street, opposite Church Lane

junction on Maxey Road and by the school on Station (Glinton) Road.

The original school in Glinton Road closed in 1965 with the opening of the current John Clare School. Another building to close during the century was Helpston Station, the last train stopping there on 4 June 1966.

Helpston was hardly on the front line in either of the World Wars, but many villagers served and died for their country. In the Second World War some of the very first bombs dropped on England fell between the station and Etton, where there was a dummy airfield. Later a stray German plane opened fire on the crossing.



Last Helpston train 1966

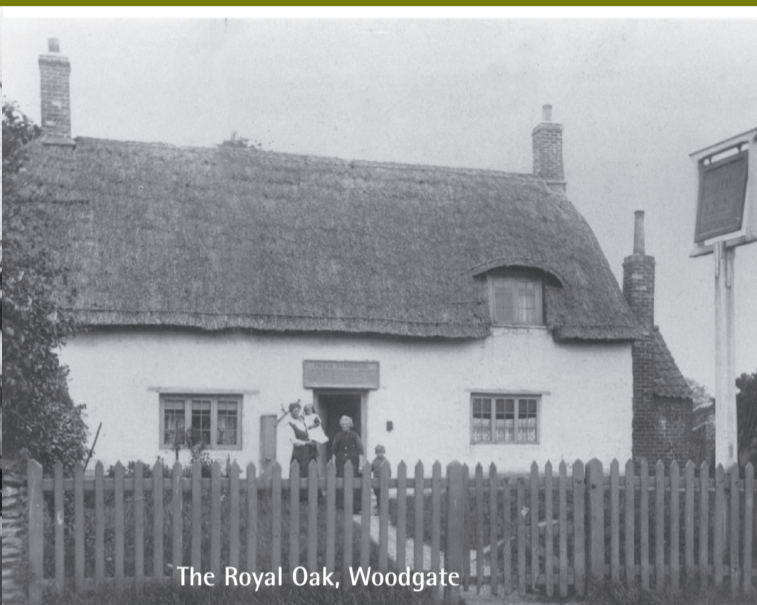
Today's Helpston continues to develop and change successfully. The village won the 1999 Fairhaven Trophy for Cambridgeshire Village of the Year and the Proby Trophy for Peterborough's Village of the Year from 1997-2000.

In 2005 the village celebrated the creation of a new nature reserve at Swaddywell Pit and in 2006 Botolph's Barn itself opened. In the same year, John Clare's Cottage was purchased by the John Clare Education and Environment Trust and will open shortly as a centre for the celebration of the poet's life and legacies.

Helpston's Beer and Public Houses, 1851



The Queen's Head, West Street



The Royal Oak, Woodgate

In 1851 the village had a population of 697, of whom 367 were male and 330 female.

There were five beer houses and three public houses. Beer houses were restricted to the sale of beer, ale and porter, cider and perry. The five beer houses have all become private dwellings. Two public houses, the Bluebell and the Exeter Arms, remain.



The Blue Bell, Woodgate

The Exeter Arms, named after the Marquis of Exeter, who lived at nearby Burghley House, had been the meeting place of the local hundred court since the early 18th century. In 1851 the Blue Bell was run by William Bradford, who was also a tailor. He was

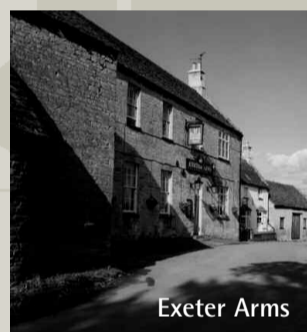
the father of Sir James Bradford who later founded the Almshouses on West Street.

The Railway Inn on Ginton Road became an inn following the construction of the railway in the 1840s. In 1865 its landlord, Joseph Fletcher, was convicted of receiving stolen wheat. His wife's application to continue with the licence was turned down by magistrates, as she was 'no doubt aware of the transactions of her husband and therefore was not a proper person to be entrusted with the licence.' It finally closed in 1958.

The Royal Oak in Woodgate was managed by John Cluff, who was also a wheelwright employing four

men. It closed about 1930.

The Prince of Wales, later known as "The Feathers" in West Street, held a central position in the village. Similarly The Parting Pot, near The Nook, was built in 1819 following completion of the road to Ginton in 1813. William Charity was its landlord in 1851, as well as being both a carpenter and butcher. It changed to residential use in 1955. The Queen's Head, also in West Street became a private dwelling in 1959.



Exeter Arms

The other beer house in 1851 was the Fitzwilliam Arms, although its location is unclear. In addition, at least two other 'pubs' have existed at different times. In 1731, Wainfleet House on Woodgate was a known as the Axe and Cleaver whilst the house on the corner of Maxey and Ginton Roads was both a pub and a brewery, known as the Carpenters Arms, in the late 19th century.

This board is based on an article by local historian George Boyden which appeared in the Helpston Chronicle in Autumn 1988.